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## NATO After the First Tranche

### *A Strategic Rationale for Enlargement*

by Hans Binnendijk and Richard L. Kugler

#### Conclusions

- The first tranche of NATO enlargement—adding Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic next year—will help stabilize an historically unstable region and bring security benefits to all of Europe.
- Enlargement raises a number of difficult questions. How should enlargement unfold in the future? What should be the standards for selecting new members? Above all, what is NATO trying to achieve by enlarging further?
- It is time to take a hard look at the process of future enlargements. Enlargement needs to serve the Alliance's vital interests and Europe's security as a whole.
- A NATO open-door policy, driven by only a loose set of political standards for enlargement, could have a detrimental effect on both NATO and Europe.
- Enlargement needs to be guided by an explicit strategic rationale. Membership should not be granted simply for democratic conduct. Enlargement should occur only when it enhances NATO as a credible military alliance and produces compelling security benefits.

#### Giving Enlargement A Strategic Rationale

A strategic rationale for enlargement would help ensure that further NATO enlargements are carried out wisely, with positive effects. For the United States, enlargement should be one part of a strategic policy aimed at stabilizing Europe and adapting NATO to deal with new threats on Europe's periphery and beyond its borders. Admitting Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic serves this agenda and is accomplishing its strategic purpose of making Central Europe increasingly stable and secure. The countries of the region are developing democratic governments and free market economies, establishing civilian control over their militaries, and downsizing their force postures while upgrading their military quality to NATO standards. The three prospective members are contributing to military missions on

NATO's periphery. In short, they are producing more security than they consume. NATO now needs to decide whether offering accession to other aspirant states will accomplish similarly worthy goals.

In September 1995, NATO proclaimed that enlargement must serve the Alliance's security interests. But the momentum of the first enlargement created a dynamic that discounts strategic purposes and increasingly emphasizes looser, less discriminating political standards. These standards imply that a European state can qualify for admission if it presents credentials as a budding democracy, with a market economy, civilian control of the military, a responsible foreign policy toward its neighbors, a credible Partnership for Peace (PFP) track record, NATO-compatible military forces, and a willingness to participate in NATO activities.

These standards deny NATO a strong and consistent rationale for saying "no" when its security interests and strategic purposes are not served by enlargement. In response to the NATO open-door policy and a recently acquired freedom to choose, 12 states sought membership. Moreover, the list of potential candidates does not necessarily end there. Austria, Sweden, and Finland have not yet applied but they might, at some point; and they already meet most NATO political standards.

Most aspiring states view membership as a step to advance their own security interests. Planning their military postures for the next decade or two, most of the nine aspirant states are concerned about defending themselves if the security environment deteriorates. Yet, they do not want to commit large defense budgets that would slow their economic recoveries. Membership in NATO provides strong protection and a means to minimize defense expenditures.

This self-focused stance is understandable, but it could diminish the cohesion and effectiveness of NATO. The NATO approach to enlargement needs a stronger strategic focus. Deliberations tend to focus too much on the political merits of each aspiring state, rather than on Alliance goals and strategy, or the regional and theater-wide implications of admitting new members.

### **Toward a Larger but Less Effective NATO?**

Swift movement to a larger alliance could alter the political and military character of NATO. Populating the North Atlantic Council (NAC) with a large bloc of new members could make consensus-building and decisionmaking significantly harder. NATO might still be able to perform some missions, such as peacekeeping in cases where a widespread political consensus exists. But its effectiveness as a military alliance to perform other critical functions could be eroded.

A significantly larger alliance might not produce a more stable Europe or even render new members secure. If enlargement weakens NATO, new members could find themselves deprived of the credible security guarantees that led them to seek NATO membership. This could leave them still searching for security in other ways—a destabilizing trend that enlargement originally was intended to avoid. Moreover, potential rogues would be unimpressed by a larger NATO if its political will and military power to contest aggression are diminished.

The same reasoning applies to the daunting task of forging a new NATO southern strategy and preparing for new security missions both inside Europe and beyond its borders. Growing threats from the South mean that NATO may need to prepare WMD defenses and defend its interests better than now, not only in Europe but outside Europe as well. If NATO enlarges too quickly, it may be unable to carry out this important strategic shift.

## **Establishing a Strategic Purpose**

NATO might avoid the dangers of enlargement if it is guided by a clear strategic purpose. A clearer strategic purpose would supplement NATO's existing political standards for admitting new members with firm strategic standards that enhance, not undermine, NATO security.

A strategic purpose would focus on enhancing the capacity of NATO to handle future security challenges. It would aspire to create an improved alliance for the 21st century that still provides collective defense, but can also perform new European missions, project power outside Europe, and defend common interests in distant regions.

NATO must preserve its character as an effective military alliance for two reasons: (1) The Alliance's borders must always be safeguarded against unexpected surprises; (2) new NATO functions of projecting power and stability can be performed only if the Alliance maintains the ability to provide for collective defense.

A strategic purpose would also support a conscious external security strategy, and would use further enlargement to help carry it out. A strategic purpose would be anchored not in containment and deterrence, but in a new, forward-looking NATO strategy that shapes the peacetime environment, responds to a wide spectrum of contingencies, and prepares for an uncertain future. It would pursue two fundamental goals: first, to consolidate NATO's Eastern enlargement by promoting integration and stability, and preventing competition and conflict in Central Europe; second, to configure NATO for pursuing a robust Southern strategy within Europe and beyond.

Accordingly, a strategic purpose would establish firm standards for guiding further enlargement, so that the door is kept open but new members are admitted only when this step makes strategic sense and furthers NATO security interests. These standards would permit admission of new members when:

- Admitting them directly supports NATO interests, strategy, and security goals
- NATO can effectively absorb and integrate new members, and truly provide them collective defense protection.
- Candidates are willing and able to significantly contribute to the old and new Alliance security missions. That is, they must be able to produce security for NATO, not just consume it.
- NATO cohesion, decisionmaking, and military effectiveness at carrying out old and new missions are enhanced, not diminished.
- Admission will meaningfully enhance Europe's stability as a whole, rather than trigger instability, and other measures will not produce similar effects at less risk of overextending NATO.

These standards are meant to create flexible guidelines. The standards would bring discipline to what otherwise could become an unruly "logrolling" process that ultimately damages NATO and European security by admitting too many or perhaps the wrong countries.

## **Enlarging in Slow, Limited Ways**

Slow, selective, discriminating enlargement should give NATO time to integrate its first tranche

members, to survey Europe's situation, and to make judgments judiciously. A deliberate process may frustrate some prospective candidates, but over the long haul, they will be better served by a NATO that enlarges one step at a time, ensuring that each phase is handled well.

Effectively integrating the first tranche members into NATO is critical to making enlargement a success. It will require a concerted effort to carry out the military dimensions of enlargement. The new members must be brought into the integrated command. Their forces must be downsized and endowed with higher quality in readiness and modernization to meet NATO standards for compatibility and interoperability. And, current NATO forces must be strengthened so that they can carry out new NATO commitments in Eastern Europe.

Some may argue that because the first tranche will fulfill NATO's top strategic priorities, there is no compelling need to enlarge further. Even though further enlargement may not be as compelling, this does not mean enlargement fails to make strategic sense. The key point is that NATO enjoys the luxury of flexibility. A strategic purpose argues that when the political, military, and economic costs of enlargement outweigh the benefits, NATO should refrain. But when the benefits exceed the costs, NATO should admit new members, on a schedule ensuring they can be absorbed effectively.

### **Appraising the Candidates**

One of the main problems regarding further enlargement is that there are no clear and obvious candidates for inclusion in a second round. Most lack either the will or the ability to fulfill NATO strategic purposes. Sweden, Finland, and Austria all qualify on democratic and economic grounds. They also have established strong civilian control over their militaries. But neither **Finland** nor **Sweden** feels a strong urge to join NATO and carry out its policies.

In **Austria** the ruling coalition is split, with the Peoples' Party supporting NATO membership and the Social Democrats opposed. But Hungary's inclusion in NATO may accelerate Austria's security debate and intensify pressures to join the Alliance. Indeed, NATO could expect an application from Austria within the next three to five years. Austrian membership would have some important strategic advantages for NATO. It would provide access to Hungary in a crisis. It would also make rapid deployment of NATO troops to the Balkans easier. But favorable geography alone is not enough. Austria spends less than one percent of its GDP on defense—well below the NATO average. Given our strategic standards, Austria would have to demonstrate a greater willingness to produce security before it is accepted for NATO membership.

In Central and Eastern Europe, **Slovakia** provides a land corridor to Hungary, and the results of the September 1998 election are a first step on the road to political rehabilitation. **Slovenia** meets the economic and political criteria. It also provides a land corridor to Hungary. But neither country has a military force which would contribute significantly to meeting NATO's new military challenges.

A strong case can be made for **Romania** on strategic grounds. Romania occupies a strategic position in the Balkans and Black Sea region. It could serve as a staging area for peace support operations in the Balkans. But it needs to make more progress in building democracy, and in economic and military reform, before it could be considered for membership.

**Bulgaria** also occupies a strategic position in the Balkans. It has moved toward creating a viable democratic system and market economy since the May 1997 elections. But it has only begun restructuring its military, so it will be some time before it is ready to be considered for NATO

membership.

**Albania and Macedonia**, two other Balkan candidates, do not qualify on economic, political, or military grounds. They are major consumers of security, not producers of it. Moreover, the security problems faced by these countries are largely ethnic and internal in nature, and thus would not be resolved by NATO membership. NATO should not strengthen ties to these countries—but membership is not the best way of addressing their security problems.

The three Baltic states—**Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia**—pose perhaps the most difficult dilemma. The Western community faces a moral imperative to ensure that these democratic countries are made secure. Militarily, they are too poorly prepared to defend themselves, much less perform other NATO missions. Their forces may improve, but even so, NATO would be hard-pressed to rush reinforcements to them in time to ward off major aggression. NATO needs to avoid making hollow Article 5 commitments that cannot be carried out when needed.

Admitting the Baltic states is not out of the question, but NATO should do so only if its strategic purposes are served by such a move. NATO can, however, enhance their security by helping them build strong governments, viable economies, and better military forces. Encouraging them to develop security ties with their Nordic neighbors, the United States, and other European powers is another sound step. Bringing them into the European Union (EU) would also give them enhanced economic prosperity, closer ties to European democracies, and a greater sense of security. If these measures are fully pursued, NATO membership may become less important because these countries will be secure even without it.

### **Managing Relations with Russia and Ukraine**

NATO also needs to consider how Russia, Ukraine, and other CIS states fit into the enlargement calculus. Russia grudgingly accepted the first tranche, but it is worried about further enlargement. A deliberate enlargement policy would defuse these concerns and give time for both sides to develop the Permanent Joint Council (PJC), established when NATO and Russia, in May 1997, signed the *Founding Act on Mutual Relations* as a mechanism for deepening cooperation. Some commentators worry that the PJC will give Russia a veto over NATO decisionmaking. The real danger, however, is the opposite: that the two sides will fail to exploit its potential.

Western states want a good partnership with Russia, but this does not translate into the conclusion that Russia should join NATO in the foreseeable future. Because Russia can defend itself, it does not need NATO military protection. Moreover, NATO will be reluctant to guarantee defense of Russia's borders, and Russia will be equally reluctant to defend NATO's borders. If Russia makes the successful transition to democracy, it should be welcomed as a member of the Western community and its other institutions, but NATO membership would create difficult problems.

Ensuring Ukraine's sovereignty and independence calls for a NATO/Ukrainian partnership short of membership. NATO could not readily carry out Article 5 guarantees to Ukraine against a major military threat without building a large military infrastructure in Eastern Europe. This would probably trigger a militarization of Russia's relations with Belarus and Ukraine. And, Ukraine has not yet demonstrated a convincing commitment to political and economic reform nor established strong civilian control over its military. Without reform, Ukraine's chances of being integrated into broader Euro-Atlantic structures remain poor.

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Distinguished Research Professor at INSS. A longer version of this paper will appear in a forthcoming issue of The Washington Quarterly.

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